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THE SOUTH AFRICAN DOCTRINE OF SOULS.¹

IN the second of two interesting papers on the manners, customs, superstitions, and religions of South African tribes (*Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, vol. xix. No. 3, and vol. xx. No. 2), the Rev. James Macdonald, who has had ample opportunities of studying the subject, has a good deal to say about the doctrine of souls which prevails among the aborigines of South Africa. It is extremely difficult, he explains, to discover what the people really believe about the spirit-world, so many and varied are the traditions relating to it. There are, however, certain outstanding facts common to all; and of these Mr. Macdonald gives a clear and instructive account.

All human beings are supposed to have souls, but their souls are not believed to be entirely confined to the body. A man's soul may, it is thought, occupy the roof of his hut; and, if he changes his residence, his soul does so at the same time. Mr. Macdonald takes this to be a loose and indefinite way of expressing "the belief that a man's spirit may have influence at a distance from the place where he is himself at any time." The people often use the word "zitunzela," from "izitunzi" ("shadows"), to express their ideas of human spirits and the unseen world generally; and this is "the nearest description that can be obtained." A man is constantly attended by the shadows or spirits of his ancestors as well as his own, but the spirit of one who dies without speaking to his children shortly before death never visits his descendants except for purposes of evil. In such cases magicians or priests offer costly sacrifices to prevent misfortune and death.

Great importance is attached to dreams or visions, which are supposed to be due to spirit influence. When the same dream comes more than once, the dreamer consults the magicians, who profess to receive revelations through dreams. If the dreamer has seen "a departed relative," the magician says, "He is hungry." Then a beast is killed; the blood is collected, and placed in a vessel at the side of the hut farthest from the door: the liver is hung up in the hut, and must not be eaten until all the flesh of the animal has been used. The "essence" of the food is "withdrawn" by the spirit during the night, and after a specified time all may be eaten except the portions which the magician orders to be burned.

Ancestor-worship is not only professed by the South African tribes, but "they actually regulate their conduct by it." Says Mr. Macdonald,—

"If a man has a narrow escape from accident and death, he says, 'My father's soul saved me,' and he offers a sacrifice of

thanksgiving accordingly. In cases of sickness, propitiatory sacrifices are offered to remove the displeasure of the ancestors, and secure a return of their favor. Should any one neglect a national custom in the conduct of his affairs, he must offer sacrifice to avert calamity as the consequence of his neglect. When offering propitiatory sacrifices, the form of prayer used by the priest is, 'Ye who are above, accept our offering and remove our trouble.' In freewill offerings, as in escape from danger, or at the ripening of crops, the prayer takes the following form: 'Ye who are above, accept the food we have provided for you, smell our offering now burning, and grant us prosperity and peace.'"

Animals are not supposed to have souls, neither are inanimate objects; but spirits may reside in inanimate objects, and their presence has an influence on many customs and habits. A striking example of such influence was afforded during the rebellion of 1879, when Umhlonhlo, after the murder of the British Resident, was one day marching in a leisurely manner across country with his whole army. The forenoon was hot, and not a cloud was to be seen. Presently the magicians noticed on the horizon a peculiarly shaped cloud. "It rose rapidly in one mass, and 'rolled upon itself.' Its movements were intently watched till it approached the zenith and passed over the sun. This was an evil omen. For some unknown cause the spirits were mortally offended, and had come over the army in shadow at noonday. In grief and sorrow their backs were turned upon their children, and the result of this would be certain defeat and disaster. There was, however, no immediate danger. That morning's scouts had reported that there were no troops within many miles of their line of march, and they could repair to some sacred place to offer sacrifices and make atonement. While they were discussing which place to repair to for this purpose, the van of a small column of cavalry appeared unexpectedly over a rising ground. Dismay struck into every heart. The war minister urged his men to form into order of battle. No one answered his summons. He did his best to organize an orderly retreat, but in vain. Not a blow was struck, and every man took to his heels, making for the nearest hiding-place in mountain or forest. That army never re-assembled. Black-hearted fear utterly demoralized it."

Water or river spirits play a great part in South African mythology. They inhabit deep pools where there are strong eddies and under-currents. They are dwarfs, and are of a malignant disposition, which they display by greedily seizing on any one who comes within their reach. They are, of course, greatly feared; and the popular dread of them is shown in a way which has been known in many different parts of the world. Mr. Macdonald gives the following example:—

"Some years ago a number of Gcaleka girls were, on a fine summer day, bathing in the Bashee. One of them got beyond her depth, and began to struggle in the water, and cry for help. Her companions promptly raised the alarm, and two men working close by ran down to the water's edge. She was still struggling feebly, but to the onlookers it was a clear case of being 'called' by the river, and they made no attempt to save her. The body was recovered by the magicians the same day, when it was found she had been drowned in less than five feet of water. All this came to the ears of C. G. H. Bell, Esq., the English Resident; and he cited the parties, magicians and all, to appear before him in court. The two men not only admitted that they could have waded to the spot where they saw her struggling, but also said the water would not be 'more than breast deep.' They had made no effort to save her, as it would be 'improper and dangerous to interfere when one is called by the river.' Mr. Bell tried to argue them out of such absurd notions, but to little purpose, and finally came to the conclusion that 'six months hard' might be more effectual in eradicating superstition than all his philosophy, and six months hard it accordingly was."

Mr. Macdonald says there is no periodical process of purging or driving away spirits. Without the presence and aid of magicians, ordinary people dare not interfere with these mysterious powers, however malignant and destructive they may become. Although a man is guarded by the spirits of his ancestors, they do not protect him from demons or from wizards and witches. A certain

¹ From Nature.